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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger study of school system communication with second language parents in three Alberta (Canada) urban senior high schools, this study focused on analysis of interview data from teachers responding to questions on intercultural communication barriers and bridges with students and immigrant parents. Data were collected through 30 minute interviews with 27 high school teachers. Notes from the interviews were coded, loaded into a computer by category, analyzed, and sorted into further categories using an iterative comparison process. Findings were summarized as follows: (1) second language students feel displaced, are academic achievers, feel alienated from Canadian born peers and their own families, and are in denial of the culture of Canada and other cultures; (2) parents of second language students are distrustful of the Canadian educational system, are resistant of new values their children want to adopt, maintain patriarchal relationships with those around them, and feel powerless and dependent upon their children to help them cope with the English language environment; and (3) school systems are ethnocentric and are committed to providing equal service to second language students compared to English-speaking students. In addition, the needs of parents, students and school systems are listed as perceived by teachers. Included are 30 references. (JB)

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND BRIDGES: TALKING WITH HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS ABOUT MULTI-CULTURALISM

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION BARRIERS AND BRIDGES: TALKING WITH HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS ABOUT MULTI-CULTURALISM

Introduction

This report is part of a larger study of school system communication with second language parents of three urban senior high schools in which school personnel and immigrant parents are to be interviewed. This report is restricted to analysis of interview data of teachers. Teachers were asked several open ended questions (See Appendix A) on intercultural communication barriers and bridges with students and immigrant parents.

In discussing school response to a growing presence of second language students from upwards of one hundred countries of origin, it was important to discriminate a "multi-cultural" problem from a "normal teenager" problem. As a teacher commented,

> "When a Canadian-born student comes to us, he comes with baggage - teenager, boyfriend, problems at home, social maturity. When a non-Canadian student comes to us as an ESL student, we have to deal with the language problem too. They are often 16 years old and assertive...if they are not assertive is that normal for their culture? We need resources to handle these complexities."

Many propositions made in this paper for second language students may also be valid for English speaking adolescent problems found in schools. But these propositions will hold <u>more strongly</u> for second language students and consequently are important to address.

If school personnel possess little understanding of cultural backgrounds of second language students they might

overcompensate giving second language students extra consideration. In such cases English speaking students may feel inequities. A teacher told stated,

> "White kids are noticing extra consideration for the non-whites. Attitudes of reverse discrimination. 'Gee, if that were us, we'd be kicked out by now.'"

Certainly an unanticipated consequence, feelings of reverse discrimination may largely be avoided by responding to student needs in culturally-appropriate ways. Knowledge of cultures is essential for teachers today. As a teacher commented about a disruptive student, "Sometimes I feel the misbehaving student does not understand and wonder if the behaviour is cultural or just bad."

Need For The Study

In general, parental communication with high schools is problematic for many reasons. As children grow older they typically demand more autonomy from their parents and thus dislike sustained involvement of their parents with schools. In addition, size is a barrier, for most high schools are larger than elementary schools and seem more formidable to parents (Carreiro, 1989; Church, 1990; Garrett, 1990). Compounding this phenomenon, urban centres throughout Canada are experiencing an influx of immigrant families (Employment Immigration Canada, 1991). Communication between high schools and immigrant parents (with English as a second language) is even more problematic as cultural norms are different and language barriers are significant (Opper, 1985; Jacques, 1989; OECD, 1987; Hall, 1977). As the wave of

immigration is predicted to increase in the foreseeable future (Employment Immigration Canada, 1991) the development of policies and initiatives to improve communication between high schools and immigrant parents is an area requiring high priority.

Although much work is reported in intercultural communication literature (Samorvar, 1988; Kim, 1986; Shuter, 1984), and intercultural education (Megarry, 1981; Wong, 1972; Morris, 1989; Leung, 1984), and immigrant children in schools literature (Bhatnagar, 1981; Ashworth, 1988; Enns, 1978; McNoll, 1976), little is reported on immigrant families in communication with Canadian school systems. In conducting this study, several assumptions are made: (1) immigration will continue at the present level or will increase; (2) urban school systems will continue to experience an influx of immigrant families; (3) school districts, while adapting to an increase in immigrant students at the school building level by introducing English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, have failed to provide system-wide responses to increased communication needs between the homes of immigrant students and the school; and, (4) the lack of effective communication with the home places students at risk of joining ethnic gangs or dropping out of school.

Methodology and Analysis

Senior high school teachers in the province of Alberta, Canada, who frequently encountered second language students

in their classes were asked to be interviewed. They signed permission forms and were guaranteed anonymity according to ethical review standards set by their school district and the university. To date, a total of 27 teachers in one high school were interviewed over thirty minute blocks of time.

Interview questions encouraged teachers to focus on issues they felt important. Notes of the interviews were taken. Copies of these notes were read and coded into categories according to rigorous interview analysis coding methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The notes were then inputted into a computer according to category. Two research questions guided the next stage of analysis:

1. What issues regarding second language students and communication with their parents do teachers consider most important?

2. How do teachers respond to problems regarding second language students and communication with their parents?

When analyzing the interview data it became apparent that teachers talked about three things. They talked about "ESL kids, about their parents, and about the school." The interview data revealed that teachers characterized second language students, their parents, and the school system and also described their needs. Thus six categories emerged: (1) ESL Kids, (2) ESL Kid Needs, (3) Parents, (4) Parent Needs, (5) System, and (6) System Needs.

In the next stage of analysis, the interview data were arranged into sub-categories under headings of the six

categories using an iterative comparison process until the majority of the statements made by teachers were included into the category/sub-category framework.

Findings

ESL Kids

Displaced

Social displacement occurs when people exclude or denounce an individual. Displacement is a negative experience to those seeking stability in relationships with others. Second language students feel displaced from their homeland and at the same time from Canadian society.

Teachers noted that second language students feel displaced from their home of origin and from their home of choice. To understand this concept better, it is important to consider who actually immigrates to Canada. Four groupings of second language students can be identified in Canadian schools. They are immigrants from non-English-speaking countries, who are usually accompanied by at least one parent; immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean, who speak Creole and are coming to join their parents in Canada who immigrated years before on their own; refugees from war-torn countries who bring with them painful memories of violence and loss of family and friends; and, visa students, increasingly from Hong Kong, who are sponsored by an uncle or aunt (Coelho et al, 1988).

Visa Students

The difference among these groupings has an effect upon teacher-student relationships because adolescents who live in an arranged family, rather than a natural family, experience varying levels of support to attend school. A teacher stated,

> "Parents do not show up for parent meetings because often kids are here as visa students and they are sponsored by friends of family and residents. The school sets up meetings for parents but they do not show up."

Second language students who immigrated to Canada without their parents may be adjusting to Canadian culture as orphans, as recently reunited with their parents after years of living without them, or as living with a member of the extended family, such as their grand parents, uncles, aunts, or cousins.

Isolated

These students confront their new country on their own. They struggle to understand why laws, values, attitudes and traditions are different, why the school is different, and what their relationship to institutions and people of Canadian society might be. A teacher demonstrated understanding of this concept,

> "Kids experience post trauma stress, adjustment difficulties. They don't know who they are. They see their values and language not appreciated in our schools. They feel isolated and lose self-esteem."

Violence

Many second language refugee students have had unimaginable experiences wherein they learned that life is contingent upon luck or simply upon the will of others more powerful. Learning to act appropriately in a society that considers life precious is problematic for many refugees who have learned that coercive power responses are essential to gain control over their own lives. In recounting the story of a student, a teacher stated,

> "An immigrant student had an uncle and a friend who disappeared in Nicaragua. His best friend was later found alive but his uncle was found executed. Life went on and people accepted their fate. We don't understand the life these people must have lived."

So immigrants often feel displaced from Canadian society which does not accept violence as a norm of behaviour. They do not feel part of the student body of the school and often act out in inappropriate ways as a consequence. A teacher remarked,

> "Refugee students are big problems. They are from war torn countries. They are not progressing well here. For example they may have four years in a refugee camp with one hour a day of learning, living on the run. They tend to be 16-17, older than other students."

It may be stated that Canadians are socialized into Canadian culture through common experiences such as attending public school for 9 to 12 years, using socialized medicine facilities in maintaining their health, operating within the limitations of the law, and expecting to find appropriate and gainful employment. Experiences such as these prepare Canadians to conduct themselves in a functional manner

within society and to hold realistic expectations to gain a measure of self empowerment and self control in thier lives.

Achievers

Teachers generally held the opinion that second language students were academic achievers compared to Canadian-born students. Although second language students did not score the highest grades in classes, most teachers expressed admiration of their strong will to score high marks. Thus a major characteristic of second language students is "academically-oriented," or "achievers."

Working Overtime

Several teachers were aware of second language students holding down several jobs as well as attending school full-time. One teacher said,

> "A Vietnamese mother works day and night. The daughter works day and night. The father was killed over seas."

Another teacher commented,

> "I know of ESL kids working 6-8 hours a night and go to school during the day to help support themselves or family."

Symbols of Belonging

Many second language students are from collectivist societies where belonging to groups and identifying with group values are important. Consequently publicly holding attitudes which reflect a particular group is expected. Achievement maybe understood in this way. If a student completed an activity, receiving an award indicating that

the student performed this activity is expected, even if the activity were minor. For instance, a teacher observed,

> "Hong Kong kids do a swimming lesson and they expect a badge whether they learned anything or not. 'Whites' get annoyed because they may not have learned to swim and should not get a badge."

Scholarships

In a similar vein, second language students strive to receive scholarships awarded by the high school each year. A counsellor in charge of determining award recipients was surprised to discover, that

> "of all the scholarships given out this year, only one white student received a major one. Of over $90,000 in awards, whites received one at $1500 and one at $500."

An English teacher talked of how second language students held a high level of motivation to achieve. Not often did she experience students anxious for a faster pace in learning than she demanded in class. But she commented,

> "The ESL based students seem more highly motivated. I've one girl who is at least three weeks ahead of the rest of thé class."

Alienated

When the need for approval and affiliation are not met, people may feel alienated. Second language students experience alienation from other students, from the school system, and from their own parents.

Protective Colouration

The ease of making friends across cultural boundaries seems to be gender related. Second language females seem to

make friends with people of other cultures more readily than males. A teacher noted that,

> "Boys tend to cluster together. Especially the Lebanese, East Indians, and Orientals. They are seen to cluster in the rotunda at lunch. I call it protective colouration."

As one walks around schools it is noticeable how often males group together, behaving in culturally specific ways. It is less noticeable that females cluster. They seem to integrate into the student population more evenly. Males appear to be more alienated than females who tend to develop a sense of attachment with others.

Cannot be Normal

On the other hand, female second language students sense alienation in a more personal way. Their parents hold expectations of arranged marriages and homemaker roles for them. Female second language students may strive to become involved with extra-curricular or co-curricular programs at the school but not be able to participate in every day events. A basketball coach was surprised to discover one of her players participated as a team member with definite limitations on her freedom. She said,

> "Last night we had a game with a neighbouring school eight blocks away. A girl on my basketball team is East Indian and said that her father won't let her walk that far. I was surprised. She is 16, in grade 10, and seems really Canadianized. But father has core values that he cannot accept being challenged."

The coach arranged to escort the girl to the game.

Secret Lives

Second language students handle their dual roles at home and school in a manner which further alienates them. Parents hold fast to cultural expectations while children attempt to gain approval and develop relationships with Canadian children. A teacher reflected on her experiences in a Careers and Life Management (CALM) class,

> "Kids differentiate their roles. They are role players. They say they don't talk to their parents. For example, in CALM class, sexuality is not talked about with parents. They seem to know that ... who to talk about what to. It is like they are aware of unwritten rules."

Consequently many second language students live secret lives unknown to their parents. They feel sad about the deceit but feel the need for acceptance by their peers.

Son - The Future Hope

Alienation occurs at another level, too. Immigrant parents who are often well educated, but who cannot work in their chosen professions once in Canada, accept more menial jobs to survive. Their hope is for their children who will be able to live a more prosperous life in Canada. Parents often expect the entire family to work so that one, usually a son, may have a chosen profession. Thus the family directs its collective energy to benefit the son, its future hope. Consequently, the son lives under conditions beyond the experiences of most Canadians, and feels alienated for Canadian-born peers tend to dislike him. A teacher remarked,

> "The son is spoiled rotten ... has to have his meals made even though he is home first. Mother has spoiled him rotten."

In Denial

Second language students may be in denial of their chosen culture. They do not understand nor accept Canadian culture. This denial may be seen in three ways:

"Canadians are Sissies"

Canadian culture does not endorse the primacy of use of physical threats or coercive power in daily relationship maintenance. Second language students who come from cultures which endorses the primacy of power have difficulty adapting to Canadian ways; and reject them instead. A teacher commented,

> "We do not like violence and many oriental and Lebanese students consider Canadians sissies. Lebanese kids are respectful of authority but in peer group it's important to be competitive not back peddle...not resolve things."

Some students reject our system of education as well because they do not feel cared for,

> "A Chinese professional recently commented that Chinese and Taiwan kids are used to being beaten in school back home. One Taiwan child must have been beaten 100+ times before he immigrated to Canada. So it is often felt that our schools do not discipline, nor care about kids if they are allowed to get away with anything without being beaten."

Other students react against the school system in order to gain a sense of self control,

> "Discipline is different here than in their homeland. They come here and figure the system out. And kids learn to abuse the system. Parents do too. Especially the Spanish speaking.. they think that schools are lax etc."

Racial Discrimination

Ironically, second language students often act in racially discriminative ways. Since their homelands were usually monocultural, they were socialized to one culture only. Thus they relate to the world in a more ethnocentric way than most Canadians do and often act out against each other. A teacher noted,

> "Immigrant students are very prejudiced with one another. They are frustrated and tend to take it out on each other. They revert to emotions and name calling. They come from monolingual cultures - to a culture where anything goes with lots of other subgroups."

An ESL teacher commented,

> "We mix kids up cross culturally and they refuse to talk. They may mimic each other and fights begin. Kids learn to use swear words in the other's language first. They learn to put each other down."

Racial discrimination is an act of denial of the validity of others. Second language students who come from monolinguistic cultures experience difficulty adapting to several languages being spoken in class beside their own. Compounding this difficulty is all students in the class are being treated equally by the English-speaking teacher. Their native language is not being validated like it was in their country of origin.

Racially Discriminative

It is common for subcultures to react against norms of other cultures in defensive ways. For instance, if a group of students blocked the school halls and made sexist comments to women passing by, the school administration

would respond to this as inappropriate behaviour. In a multi-cultural situation this might become a focus of perceived discrimination against the cultural group. A teacher recalled such a situation,

> "Behaviour is cultural. Sometimes Lebanese students do not act in culturally appropriate ways. When the principal talked to them about this we got a call from the Lebanese Society claiming that we're picking on them."

ESL Kids Needs

If we can describe second language students as feeling displaced from their homeland and from their chosen land, as being academic achievers in school, as feeling alienated from their peers and from their parents, and as being in denial with Canadian culture and the hundreds of cultures making up the Canadian cultural mosaic, how can we enable them to contribute positively in our society? What are their needs? The following section examines four areas of need and attempts to describe them.

Connection

Stronger Social Ties

Teachers stated that second language students need courses which provide a basis for understanding relational skills,

> "We must help teach students. More CALM, more classes on coping skills on communication, understanding, tolerance, acceptance, team building, working with others, self esteem."

Consistent Parental Support

Teachers identified the necessity of connecting with parents on a more consistent basis. A teacher related the following story,

> "A kid last Semester was dropping out. He was a gang-land type. I spoke to his sister who was surprised her brother was dropping out and said, 'Oh, tell me more' The parents, sister, and student came in for a meeting. I talked clearly with them. I used facial expressions and used hands a lot. They approved of my bottom line and the kid stayed in school. He settled down and enjoyed the course...got 70%.

Grieving Loss

Every immigrant struggles with loss of his/her homeland. They know they have very little chance of ever returning even for a visit. Second language students must develop coping skills with the loss of their homeland.

> "Kids talk about their difficulties to adjust. If they have a job, they have to find a way to balance time. They are missing family who are not in Canada, they are missing friends."

The Whole Person

Being an academic achiever in a narrow sense of learning to speak English and memorize content by rote is not enough to be successful in Canadian society. Students who disregard the broader skills of self-expression, spiritual, and social, physical, and emotional aspects of their person during adolescence tend to be dysfunctional in Canadian society. Accordingly second language students who only focus on narrow aspects of academic achievement may have the following needs.

Learn to Write as Well as Speak

Some teachers felt that learning to speak English language left many second language students with poor writing skills.

> "ESL students achieve a moderate level of proficiency orally but their proficiency in writing plateaus. I get a lot of ESL students who are integrated referred to me to get help in writing. They do not understand grammatical, contextual writing. We need to offer workshops."

Writing skillfully is a powerful tool of self-expression without which more complex development of self is limited. Thus learning to write is seen as an important aspect of enabling second language students to develop their whole self.

Integration Appropriate to Individual

Teachers felt that integrating second language students into main stream courses often occurred too early. They thought it might be better to hold students in ESL classes to learn greater fluency of English as well as further acculturate to a multi-cultural society. On the other hand, other teachers thought it might be detrimental to hold second language students in ESL classes where they are essentially isolated from mainstream society in school. Earlier integration would place greater pressure on teachers who might have six or seven language groups in a class that stresses delivery of content. Suggestions were made to integrate students earlier yet reduce pressure on academic teachers. Core academic courses could be scheduled so that

grouping students from one or two language groups reduce language needs. A teacher suggested that schools would have to develop more sophisticated procedures to gauge the "standards between academic courses and integrated courses which at present is poorly judged."

Equal Access to Higher Education

A teacher stated,

> "At XXXXXXXXXXXX College, if an applicant's first language is not English they have to demonstrate proficiency by taking EN 20 and EN 30 with a minimum of 60% in each. This is discriminatory for a student may be in Canada for 12 years and may have 58% in EN 20 and 75% in EN 30 and not gain entry while an applicant with English as a first language would get in."

Another teacher had similar concerns with the local university. An extraordinary amount of program planning is required for second language students to enter university. The teacher stated,

> "A student who is Chinese with a high school diploma comes to our school to learn Math 30, 31 Etc in the Fall. I called XXXXX university to access evaluation services to get entrance pre-requisites. The university won't evaluate the student until the student applies, but that is in the Spring. At that time it is too late to make an adjustment of the high school program."

This matter is of concern for many reasons, but especially so because most second language students are years behind Canadian-born students in schooling.

Time to Develop Personally

The available pool of bilingual people at a school are mostly second language students themselves. Schools are tempted to rely upon these students to help deal with other students with low English language skills. Thus, schools

create peer assistance programs, peer ambassador programs, and work experience programs to utilize second language students on a regular basis. However, schools must remain sensitive to over-burdening second language students with expectations to help the school meet its mandate. A teacher observed,

> "There is a need to use peer translators. But for these peers it is using up their spare time and they have their own lives. We might hire them on work experience and reduce their need to work after hours."

Self-Empowerment

It was earlier stated that second language students often felt alienated. Gaining a sense of control in their lives might reduce this negative feeling. This section briefly addresses strategies for becoming self-empowered.

Be Able to Make Choices Openly

Choices made by many second language students were not supported by parents. Consequently students made choices secretly. Here is a case in point,

> "XXXXXXXX is a central location for failures of the ESL system. Highest risk are males. A Vietnamese gang ended up there. One member was a Vietnamese boy, not from a refugee camp but brought up by grand parents. He lived apart from his parents. Now in Canada, the family unit was reformed because a family unit being formed was required by immigration. He had two sisters who attended school with different levels of success. A brother arrived, he learned to control his environment and joined a gang. Others learned to depend on him and he was frequently in fights. The police knew him. He had a likeable personality and he used to chat with the school administration and police. He once said that he loved the sight of blood, he liked fighting. He came to me in grade 10. He had left home and was on the streets. A good family took him in, but his marks fell and the family ended up not wanting him. He went to Toronto to be trained in gang training. He came back

and his criminal activity increased. He was under 18, and treated the law like a joke. He was known as the "polo kid" for all his clothes carried that label. In October of this year the private Centre for ESL system failures hosted an open house and had two speakers. He was one. He told his story. The question was asked, "how did the system fail you?" In truth the system did not fail him but early integration did. Parents couldn't deal with it. The school couldn't deal with it. Kids feel they have lost control of their environment and move into crime...where they can get easy money."

A similar story was told by another teacher,

"We called in a Czechoslovakian student's parents. The student was missing classes. He had an attendance problem and was going to fail. In Eastern Europe he was a model student. When he came here he learned English quickly. At junior high school he got into drugs. His parents were very busy working hard and the son had control over his own life. They didn't know how to get him back into school and didn't understand why he was rebelling the way he was. After a long talk, the boy seemed concerned about his parents and wanted to live up to their expectations. He started coming around. He rebelled because he didn't know anyone and once we asked him to be a peer tutor, helping others helped him get to know people."

In each case, students were not able to openly communicate with parents who were working long hours and expected their sons to work too. The stories had happy endings, but the former was a failure from the perspective of the school for a private organization intervened. To be successful, students must achieve a measure of self-empowerment through school and family. Otherwise they will be attracted to groups and gangs for securing self-empowerment.

Interpreters are in the Middle

The role of interpreters affects second language student self-empowerment. If interpreters are solely

representative of the values of the home, students may feel less self-empowered than if interpreters were able to bridge needs of parents, child, and school,

> "The Lebanese interpreter seems to pound the kids. The interpreter takes a harder line than teachers are comfortable with. We don't expect such a strict authoritarian system as they are used to."

Student concerns were being represented to parents in a manner students likely felt unfair. The teacher, parents, and interpreter represented one set of values while the student represented another. The interpreter must be sensitive to emotional, psychological, and sociological issues experienced by the student to enhance self-empowerment of second language students.

Intercultural Awareness

Second language students are often in denial of the cultural values held by Canadians and other countries. They need to understand more of other cultures and gain an intercultural awareness.

The Value of Intrinsic Motivation

Second language students socialized in a climate of threats and coercion often misunderstand the nature of discipline in schools and society when they arrive in Canada. One teacher commented,

> "I see mainland China to be high in structure. Kids come here and in a democracy it seems to them that anything goes. So how to create an atmosphere of total respect with an open atmosphere. They manipulate our system. They go to court and can manipulate it, stall proceedings for instance by saying they want an interpreter."

Second language students need to understand how Canadians relate to their own society, to apply this understanding to themselves, and finally to adapt their own past experiences, their realities, to better function as new citizens. Canadian values support equality, individual rights, and knowledge. Students from cultures where different ethical and moral perspectives existed will not find intrinsic rewards which flow out of Canadian values as important or appealing as those which flow out of power and control. Second language students may reject Canadian values in favour of less altruistic ones.

Parents

Parents of second language students were a concern to teachers interviewed in this study. Analysis of the interview data on the subject of parents indicates that parents of second language students tend to be distrustful of the Canadian educational system, resistant to adapting to Canadian values in raising their children, patriarchal in orientation, and powerless with respect to controlling their children and dependent on them because parents do not speak English as well as the children.

Distrustful

The data reveal a tendency for parents to be distrustful of the school system, confused over the significance of credentials, confused over Canadian-style learning, and disenfranchised from the school system itself.

No National Entrance Exam

Parents were suspicious over the lack of a National Entrance Exam in Canada, and wondered what consistency schools could have when they were without a centralized national standard. A teacher commented,

> "A lot of Chinese parents think education is the school's responsibility while parents are responsible for food and shelter. They seem to switch emphasis on this because there is no National Entrance Exam...so once they arrive in Canada they think that education is a matter for the school."

A teacher thought that parents often misunderstood how students could achieve happiness and status in Canadian society without pursuing an academic degree; that there were many other routes students could take to complete higher education studies,

> "A Lebanese student is in the PREP program. It is too difficult for the boy's intelligence and skill ability. father is against a vocational placement. The Lebanese community is this way. So we set up a modification program to meet both their needs."

Confused Over Higher Education Credentials

Some parents were from countries where higher education only meant academic university preparation. Without a degree, people were destined to be trapped in a lower echelon of society, even despised by others,

> "If you can't go to university then you are considered an outcast of society in some ways by the academic community. Life is centered around the National Entrance Exam in China, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Taiwan. They MUST pass this."

But Canadian society is founded on different assumptions which enable people to be accepted and respected without holding a university degree. In fact, there seems to be less

contrast between university graduates and college or technology graduates in Canada compared to nations outside the Western world.

> "In Canada possessing a degree does not make that much difference compared to China, Vietnam, or Japan. If you have a BA, that is almost everything there."

Confused Over "Real" Learning

Parents of second language students expected a more rigid system of education than exists in Canadian public schools. Their reactions of distrust seemed to be consistent when they sensed quality lacking in schools. Here are three accounts of teachers.

> "As parents I think they may feel very disappointed in the Canadian system. They do not view this as real learning."

> "When working with second language parents, their view is whatever you say its the law. Recommendations to parents are put forth as 'possibilities' to avoid making it a legal requirement."

> "One Arab father was very angry. He thought the school programs were not up to snuff and made demands. Immigrants who come from academic backgrounds expect their kids to do university."

Disenfranchised

It is hard to trust something that one has not experienced. Two teachers spoke on this theme.

> "I think a lot of these parents are disenfranchised. They are fearful of the school. They did not finish school themselves. They have low self-esteem, and in their home country they were wealthy."

> "Parents are often intimidated. Relatives often come to the school for parents. Or parents bring someone to translate."

Thus parents feared that the school system was too lax, and did not serve the needs of their children well. But the system was alien to parents who were not certain how to successfully intervene on behalf of their children. Parents harboured feelings of distrust for the school; feelings which often exploded at inappropriate times for the school.

Resistant

Parents were resistant to the "Canadianization" of their children. These changes were simply everyday experiences of Canadian-born adolescents like dating, walking alone on a street, or wearing Western clothing. Parents seemed to be in denial of Canadian cultural realities which surrounded them and the pressure on their children to belong.

Different Expectations

A teacher talked about one such family and referred to CALM 20, a life skills course offered at the grade 11 level,

> "In a patriarchal community (East Indian & Lebanese) boys hold special status. For instance, with respect to CALM 20, a brother can take it but a sister can't. Father allows independent living and budgeting etc for the boy and not the girl. I thought it was the human sexuality component - but the father did not want it for her because she did not need to know about how to live independently. The father tried to get exemption on religious grounds but failed. Mom had a little bit of influence. She let the daughter dress in Western clothing, use jewellery and makeup. But because the dad was working out of home, this was being done behind his back. They had lived in Calgary 4-5 years. The mom would like to loosen the father up a little and get him to agree to change. The culture itself is not the problem. Parents coming to Canada seem to want to live within their own culture, to remain the same, and not change. Does Canada promise them that?"

Mothers often understood the pressures more keenly than fathers,

> "Communication with the home is problematic because of the culture. Kids are pulled by families one way and by peers and school another way. Particularly girls. Parents say no dating, restrict clothing, demand religious observance, traditional versus non-traditional dress. The person caught in the middle is Mom, who is trying to understand how her daughter is feeling but doesn't want to ruin her. Girls can make friends with other cultures more than boys do. "

Teachers felt torn watching girls succumbing to rigid parental pressures to adopt traditional values even though the world in which they would be living would be non-traditional.

> "How do we help students? Culturally girls quit school to go to work...this is the parent's desire. Our culture supports further education."

Teachers felt that these girls would become divorced and unable to care for themselves in a few years. Teachers were pulled between the forces of wanting to validate values of the family and knowing the statistics of marriage and single parent poverty in Canadian society.

Kids are Property

Teachers uncomfortably watched parents react to the desires of their children as if they were non-persons. A teacher confided her discomfort with an uncle of a particular female student,

> "Two years ago I had a Lebanese female student. Her uncle watched her carefully. He also attended the school. He would follow her to class. He would ask for her out of classes. He did not trust her. I was concerned for her. Arranged marriages are very

dangerous for kids. If they are skipping class parents may react violently. I don't know how to work with this."

Another teacher summed it up,

"Kids are property to dads. One said about a daughter that if she leaves this house she could be bleeding on his doorstep and he would walk over her. He would consider her dead."

Forbidding

Many parents of second language students were adamantly against adopting new values.

"A Vietnamese student female confides her problems to me. There are strong cultural differences. She can't have boyfriends. She has one but can't spend time with him. Parents demand for her to be home immediately. She only has time at school for visiting. Her parents forbid her to have a boyfriend but she has kept him. She went to his birthday party. His parents were there and a picture was taken. The girl's father saw the picture. She has two sisters, one at this school. They tell on her. They are top students and speak Vietnamese at home. The girls are university bound and are expected to have a career but they are strictly controlled with respect to boys. The youngest girl can get a drivers licence and will drive the older two girls to and from university when they go. The girls are so caught up in rules made by both father and mother. The parents are so concerned what friends in the Vietnamese community will say. The younger sister seems to be breaking out of the mold, she was younger when she came here."

These interview data were complex, having many levels of interpretation, in that many emotional and ethical issues interact with the stories. This is clear by the language chosen by the teachers in the telling of stories. Teachers clearly felt empathy for their students, but did not depart from their teacher role and become social workers. Nevertheless, they felt sadness.

"Girls seem to rebel more against parents than males because they are under the greatest stress. An Italian

father allows his boys to go out whenever, but his daughter cannot date or go out. The girl's mother said do not involve me for this is between yourself and your father. Boys have more control and can work for money, can date, but girls have no control over their lives. Girls rebel by smoking, using make up, lying, sneaking out, being sneaky, shutting down, moving out of home, becoming sexually active. All behind the parent's back. They lie to parents and they are pretty unhappy about this. This unhappiness comes out in their journal writing. They are unhappy but do not see alternatives. They rebel to regain some self control. The problem is their friends have more flexibility. Fathers don't seem to move their standards based on other parents rules for their kids."

Parents were perceived by teachers to be resistant to change. Parents of second language students were seen be in denial of the values espoused by their chosen country.

Patriarchal

Family units of many second language students manifested patriarchal characteristics. This came out during interactions between female teachers and fathers of students, and between fathers and their daughters.

Female Teachers Cannot Tell Fathers "No"

When a female teacher felt threatened by aggressive behaviour of a father, it was usual to send for backup, and an administrator was called in for support. A school counsellor related the following incident involving a patriarchal father,

"Here's an example of a Lebanese family. The mother was lovely. The father was abusive. He came into the school to scream at me and at the kid in the halls. He demanded to have certain books out of the library. The father is on social assistance and he'd take the cheque and drink it. He'd blame all bad things on daughter. When the mother tried to intervene she got hit. I brought in an Assistant Principal and the father got mad because a male came in and backed me. Later the mother asked to keep the passports locked up over

> Christmas - she was afraid he'd take the kids back to Lebanon. We must tap into the mother's feelings of protectiveness and nurturing with the children. The father sees the children as property."

A teacher also talked of the patriarchal family structure of her second language students. The father would not accept "no" from her.

> "We just integrated a specific ESL student. I'm her mentor. I put letters in mail boxes of teachers. Father has very high and unrealistic expectations of her. I work with the father. He is Spanish. I have not directly talked with him for he would accept a "no" from a male, not a female."

Do Not Understand Expectations, Roles, Rights

Parents of second language students did not understand what to expect from a school, nor did they understand how to exercise their rights appropriately. A teacher remembered a parent who was unusually intense about making his child succeed,

> "I recall one Vietnamese parent who came in asking for more homework for his child. The student was doing a lot of work already and I had to say no more homework."

Another teacher recalled,

> "The father of a Spanish student wanted her to be in Math 10, but she preferred Math 13. The father told her to demand Math 10 and threatened her. We tried to get the father into school to help explain the situation."

The fathers communicated demands to teachers and the school aggressively, when teachers are socialized to communicate assertively; the difference being an aggressive parent seeks to control others in a win-lose situation, while an assertive parent seeks to collaborate, working out a win-win situation.

Powerless

In spite of the aggressive behaviour evidenced in patriarchal families, many parents of second language students seemed to be powerless in face of their children. Teachers thought that children could ultimately choose not to be controlled by their parents and leave home; leaving parents without the ability to cope in an English-speaking world.

Parents are Dependent

Parent powerlessness arose from dependency on children. Parents felt dependent upon their children for interpreting mail, for answering telephones, for interpreting at banks, for helping at unemployment offices or social services, for translating at medical clinics and hospitals, and for interpreting at parent-teacher conferences at schools. A teacher stated,

> "An Hispanic boy lived with his mother and younger brothers. The boy was perceived by his teacher to be lazy. He was 18 years old. The teacher telephoned before Christmas with the aid of the interpreter. He was working in the evenings and weekends as an indoor house painter seven days a week. He earned $1500 a month. He contributes some to the family but he had no bank account. He just spent it. The teacher wanted him to go to the XXXX program at XXXXXXXXX...he wanted to go to XXXXX where he had friends. He finally agreed to stay at XXXXX and he was to check in with me on a regular basis. He started dropping classes. Kids have a lot of control in the home. Mom did not speak English and the kids have money and they know the 'system'. They really do have it over parents at home. Once the school had his 'number' he started to pull away. Kids are working for leather jackets, cars, booze. Kids are over 18 and threaten to leave the home. Parents feel vulnerable and dependent on them."

Another teacher agreed and saw this dependency relationship, "Students are used to helping their parents too...they go shopping with parents, read and answer mail, answer the phone."

Accepting of Son's Behaviour

In a way, since power lay in the hands of the children and not the parents, a role reversal might occur. Parents were placed in a position where they did not feel they could make demands on their children for fear they would leave. This was particularly true for their sons.

> "Chinese parents do not ask questions of their sons. Money arrives at the kitchen table on Friday night and parents wonder where it comes from and never ask but just accept it."

Another teacher concurred,

> "Parents do not ask questions of their sons. They take things at face value."

A result was that many male second language students "ruled the roost," and without holding adult perspectives and sense of long-term life goals, sons often left school without parents being aware of it.

Parent Needs

Parents of second language students were characterized above as being distrustful of the educational system, resistant to change, patriarchal, and dependent upon their children to make their way in an English-speaking world. Thus they have specific needs. Analysis of teacher interview data indicates that they had need for connection with the school, greater intercultural awareness, collaborative

communication skills, and greater self-empowerment with respect their children.

Connection

Parents of second language students need connection with the school system. This connection may be characterized as having several levels.

School Culture

Teachers talked about the need for parents to learn about school goals and to understand how the goals are appropriate in Canadian society. A teacher said,

> "We must teach parents to talk about two different cultures: schools are different than home. Kids have to learn another language. Kids from Hong Kong and Taiwan and Vietnam have higher levels of learning in math and science, but lower in communication skills and socials."

Schools in Europe and Asia tended to focus on skill development and academic rigour and discipline more than Canadian schools which tend to focus on individualism, creativity, and relational skills. Without entering a debate of which is better, suffice it to say Canadian schools has a difference which is not well understood or appreciated by parents of second language students.

Getting to Know Teachers

Another level of connection with the school is the connection parents may establish with teachers. The more comfort parents feel talking with teachers and getting to know them in several situations, the greater connection they will feel with the school. Parents could get to know

teachers as volunteers, as parents in parent-teacher meetings, as guests in the classroom, and as sponsors of school activities. A teacher remarked,

> "Parents are scared to come to schools for English is poor. In China, parents and teachers try to meet regularly once a month. They want to meet even when kids are in grade 12."

Many parents were accustomed to greater contact with schools in their country of origin. However, fear may prevent them from establishing greater contact with schools.

Teachers may inadvertently block parents from communicating with them. Teachers may wish to develop a positive relationship with students, motivating them personally by establishing strong rapport. Other teachers may utilize a reputational means to motivate. In either case, schools do not directly communicate with parents a first.

> "When taking attendance I say 'humph, still away' or 'this is the third or fourth time'. On the fourth time I ask the class about the whereabouts of the kid. Then I ask when is the best time to phone. They say a sister might be around. I just ask friends in class. I do not ask the guidance or ESL teachers etc. This is my most powerful tool. I get the message to the parents through their friends because the community still hangs in together. I have neighbours in XXXXXXXX who know me by reputation."

Need for Meaningful Feedback

Another avenue for communication between parents and teachers was through written letters home or report cards. One teacher attempted to validate the culture of his students by translating report cards in the parents' first language. This led to mixed reviews,

"Last year transitional Spanish and Arabic kids in my science 10 course took time to translate interim reports for me. They were written in the language of the parents. I didn't get appreciation for this. Parents gave me static that they spoke English at home! Two Arabic and one Spanish parents of 20 in total were annoyed."

Good intentions, but the teacher concluded that he was mystified. Communication with people of different cultures is complex, even more so when the people have status differences, such as immigrant parents and school teachers. Meaningful feedback would help establish greater parent connection with the school, but because of the many language groups involved in any given class, teachers found they had to take time to talk to individual parents before being able to provide meaningful written communication.

Intercultural Awareness

Many parents are resistant to changing their values when it comes to bringing up their children. But their children are enormously affected by peer pressure and Canadian values which often run at odds to their own. Parents need to learn about Canadian culture in order to understand the pressures children experience.

Learning Canadian Values More Readily

A teacher commented, when the school sends interpreters to the parent's home, the interpreter must seem like one in a long line of people who are intervening with them. In reflecting, the teacher concluded,

"We are encouraged to use home school workers to work with each family and connect students and parents. We

> can't send people into the home or demand family to come to the school because they won't. Someone who meets with them the moment they arrive in Canada may build trust and provide consistency...they will feel welcomed immediately."

The teacher suggested that each family be assigned to one liaison worker for the establishment period. The liaison workers would be bilingual and capable of bridging the gaps between the family and institutions in society. In this way, the family would be able to develop a trusting relationship with the worker and gain intercultural awareness more easily.

Such a worker might have bridged the gap in the situation this teacher described,

> "Some Austrian parents I have are high SES and articulate speakers. Their son and daughter are doing well. The son wanted to be a welder. Father hit the roof. Try to communicate the child's expectations to the parents and the parent expectations to the student! The father was very aggressive with the son."

Empowering Children With Values, Not Controlling Them

Teachers see students straddling two cultures, one at home and the other at school. They become close to second language students and trust develops. Consequently, teachers learn about parents through the eyes of their children. One teacher felt it would be better for parents to thoroughly learn about Canadian culture, reflect upon their own, and teach their children about both. Since children cannot be controlled, she said, empower them with information so they can make appropriate choices. The teacher shared this story,

> "At Christmas another girl got married. She probably was my best student in Math 33 last year. She was learning disabled and learned to cope and she succeeded

> brilliantly. She married and is unhappy. She won't have the education she may need in the future. Parents must be trained or informed somehow to alter expectations. They must learn how to work with their daughter using different values. This girl is dreadfully unhappy and therefore why not try to help these people who are caught between the responsibilities of one culture and the rights of the other. Kids often decide to go underground."

Collaborative

Families of second language students were perceived by teachers to be patriarchal. This meant that fathers and mothers functioned with different roles; the father was provider and decision-maker, and the mother was home maker and nurturer. Teacher attitudes supported the equality of sexes, whereby both males and females ought to be taught specific work skills. Thus, teachers felt that parents needed to learn collaboration skills and value equality in roles, and move away from patriarchal attitudes.

Learning Coping Skills

A teacher referred to the compulsory CALM (Career And Life Management) course that students took in grade eleven and thought such a course might be appropriate for parents too.

> "We must tell parents where the commitments are in our society, our school culture, regular attendance, do home work; and where the freedoms are, to have spares or non-designated time in grades 11 and 12, to choose subjects. Maybe we need to include parents in the CALM program for it includes career planning, decision making, relationships etc."

Thus parents would learn to communicate with understanding, tolerance, acceptance, team building, working with others, self-esteem.

Advocating in Culturally Appropriate Ways

Many teachers felt uncomfortable talking with some parents who believed in a patriarchal model of family. One teacher told of her experience with an Arabic family,

> "We must learn meaningful ways to express achievement to people of different cultures. A girl had 60% in Biol 10 and she was just acquiring a new language and read at a grade 4 level. Her father almost beat her in front of me. What does a teacher do? He asked me how she was doing. We need one on one warmer family communication. We need a course on this."

Another teacher, who was involved in a public parent orientation meeting one evening, felt uncomfortable with the aggressiveness of an Arabic father,

> "One father had a daughter. He was very persistent to get the details about everything she did. He wouldn't stop. He wanted us to talk about his daughter in public. We were lacking cultural information about how to proceed."

If teachers remain uncomfortable with the social behaviour of parents, they will likely avoid communicating with them. Thus parents need to learn cultural sensitivity, to be able to collaborate with teachers in a cooperative and assertive manner.

Self Empowerment

Earlier it was suggested that many parents of second language students felt powerless because their relationship with their children was highly dependent. Thus, a need for parents is to become self-empowered. Self-empowerment might develop if parents lessened dependency upon their children for interpretation of the English world around them.

Learning English

Teachers felt awkward to call a home in which nobody spoke English. One teacher told her story,

> "I called home last semester and got stony silence. I used the kid's first name and all I got was "no". I assumed that they were saying the kid wasn't home. I then called at another time, after a shift change, and I asked information about the kid. On opening day I set the tone about being concerned with all people. I will call home when I need extra information."

This teacher thought different members of the family might work shift work somewhere in the city and would phone again, hoping ultimately to communicate her concerns with the parents. Other teachers were not so persistent or creative, and accepted communicating home through the children.

> "Right now I work through the kid and hope the kid will be the channel. Direct communication with the parents is essential though."

Learning to Intrinsically Motivate

Teachers were saddened when some children finally decided to live a secret life from their parents. They sensed parents tried to dominate their children, but children allowed themselves to be controlled for so long, after which they fled from parental control. Teachers felt parents needed to learn to motivate children intrinsically as well as extrinsically, otherwise children became secretive,

> "Kids today have cut parents out of their lives. Parents are old fashioned, over protective, dominant. Kids are saddened but won't communication with parents who won't."

Knowing Their Children

Many refugee second language students were without parents, and those with parents did not know them as parents before arriving in Canada. The traditional ways of influencing children did not work with these children,

> "A Chinese refugee student had spent so long in prison camps he lost all sense of the importance of the religious ministers. These religious leaders normally have influence over non-refugee immigrants."

Parents (and guardians, as in this case) needed to find ways to develop authentic relationships with children. This involved becoming further connected with the school, to gain increased intercultural awareness, to learn to communicate in culturally appropriate ways, and to become self-empowered in parenting their children.

School System

During interviews, teachers reflected on the school system as well as on parents and students. By and large, they talked about students and parents but reflected on what the system did and how it was structured. The overwhelming interview data describing the school system led to the conclusions that, overall, the system was ethnocentric and uncommitted. The system was ethnocentric because it essentially functions to serve white Anglo-Saxon students. The system was uncommitted because it addressed the needs of second language students only in a peripheral way.

Ethnocentric

The school system was ethnocentric around Anglo-Saxon culture. The degree of ethnocentrism was seen at many levels: cultural artifacts, attitudes, values, and assumptions of relationships to other human beings. Different assumptions alluded to were equality of opportunity, gender equality, and emphasis on development of work related skills and relational skills. Cultural artifacts included rituals, hiring practise, communication practise, and curriculum content.

Cultural Celebrations

Teachers were aware of problems celebrating Christmas without celebrating other major religious festivals too. School personnel were often unaware of implications of setting school events in conflict with non-Christian celebrations. A teacher noted,

> "We set a parent meeting one night in March. It was to explain registration procedures but it fell on Ramadam, an Arabic Celebration. Most Lebanese parents could not attend."

Another teacher admonished,

> "We must ask what exactly is Canadian culture and how it is manifested. At elementary schools Christmas Concerts are debatable."

These teachers were aware of the ethnocentrism exhibited by schools. Although most teachers in Canadian schools are white, of Anglo-Saxon heritage, many understand they must reflect broader values than exists within Anglo-Saxon culture.

Teachers Tend to be Monolingual

Most teachers in urban schools in Canada have taught second language students while integrated with English language students. The emphasis in these classes was content but priority to learn English remained important to second language students. A math teacher said of his grade ten non-academic class,

> "I have 15 ESL kids in my Math 13 class of 30 students. These kids have just been integrated. I provide them with written material. The kids don't need the translated concept sheets because they are good Individual Progress students and they work hard at the English versions."

When bilingual teachers were hired, it was sometimes more difficult for the school. A teacher supervisor noted,

> "We hired a Chinese ESL teacher but it is more work for me. I'm spending more time observing him, telling him how things are done here, setting up a buddy system. He's teaching five linguistic groups and if he speaks Chinese he will offend the others. English is the neutral language. He will have more to work through."

Sometimes teachers felt overwhelmed with the unfamiliarity of second language students,

> "I communicate with kids as long as I can. We've had several individuals hauled in. If change does not come after talking, then I talk with the parents. My biggest problem is learning how to pronounce names. I have a home room of "T's". Tran, Win Tran or Tran Win...so I feel cautious not to talk with parents when I am not sure with respect to name pronunciation etc. I keep to the kids."

A guidance teacher saw humour in the sounds of unfamiliar names,

> "I am a guidance teacher responsible for students with last names beginning with Q to Z. So I get the Tings, Tangs,Tongs."

The situation where a school has monoliguistic teachers therefore often leads to ethnocentrism.

Modest Attention Paid to Parent Communication

Teachers presented several formal documents translated into several languages. For instance, report cards, parent orientation invitations, and city service brochures were translated into Arabic, Punjabi, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, French, and Portuguese. However, interim reports, anecdotal reports, newsletters, and newspapers were not. A teacher admitted,

> "To communicate with the home I had to communicate through the student and I don't know if things are getting back home at all."

Another teacher developed a checklist report card,

> "I use a checklist report card for all subjects. And these are translated for language of the parent. I use these at official midterm reports."

It might be concluded though, that most Canadian schools paid limited attention to verbal and written communication with second language parents.

Refugees Cannot be Tested

Ethnocentrism of school systems was demonstrated by the fact that schools have yet to devise a system to test second language students who are also illiterate in their first language. Many refugee students had minimal language skills because they missed school in their war torn homeland. School systems had access to culturally-bound literacy tests, that is, English language, North American culture. A teacher commented,

> "Refugee immigrants rarely have literacy in their own language. They do not have English either. But they are too old to go to elementary school and must attend the high school. There is no way to test them for their disabilities."

In another situation, a student was unable to make certain sounds in English. The school system did not have resources to know whether lacking these sounds in his first language was a symptom of speech deficiency. The school had to go beyond the system, to the home of the student, to find an answer that could be assumed to be part of the expertise of the system for English speaking children. A teacher related,

> "I have an Arabic student referred by XXXXXXXXXX for speech therapy. There were three different sounds he couldn't make. I met with the guardian, a brother, to get specific speech hearing and language information on the student using interpreters. Looking at place in family constellation and so on, his speech is naturally behind."

Another teacher pointed out that, in her view, many more second language students dropped out of school than we assumed or reported,

> "50-70 % of kids lost to streets. Last year we lost 50 of 260 ESL students at this school. Its really 50 of 125 ESL registered at the school. Of 125, 40 or better are advanced and not at risk. Really we've lost 50 of 75 of the beginner and intermediate ESL."

So many beginner or intermediate second language students dropped out, and many of these could not be tested in their own language for literacy levels. This is another indication of the level of ethnocentrism of the school system.

Schools are Not Set Up For Integration

When a second language student enrolled in a regular class, teachers became pressured to adapt their teaching

styles and accommodate issues of language. But as one teacher suggested, there was little enthusiasm to adapt,

> "In Math class some ESL students are preliterate. This is extremely difficult because some are learning disabled but there is no way to prove it for tests are English. It would be tremendous to have an interpreter...but I have three language groups with seven kids."

Another teacher recognized that second language students were often placed with unmotivated English-speaking students or students of less ability. English-speaking students who were placed in non-academic streams took less content and progressed more slowly. Schools often enrolled second language students in these classes until their English improved. But many of these second language students were bright, if not brilliant. The teacher said,

> "Science 14 & 24 are composed of subcultures. Often intelligent kids choose them. An ESL girl wanted to take it; she was bored. She got bored stiff. I encouraged her to switch to Biol 10 and the Chem 10 stream. She's now tutoring other kids. Most kids taking Sc 14 & 24 are poorly motivated and underachievers. They are WASPS. Sc 14T is a separate group."

Little Effort has been Made to Articulate Courses

Further evidence of ethnocentrism may be found in the manner ESL courses were articulated with core courses offered by the school. The fact was, little effort had been made to provide logical articulation values between courses. A teacher declared,

> "We need more comprehensive programming credits. For example, ESL 10B is similar to EN 16 which is open only to slower learning English students. The ESL 10B is 5 credits and the EN 16 is 3 credits. This makes no sense."

Actions of Schools Seem Impotent

Finally, evidence of ethnocentrism may be seen in that the school had not dealt with educational issues of major importance. In one incident, a teacher recognized how extremely second language boys reacted to cultural dissonance,

> "Kids I worry about most are boys. Girls succumb to patriarchal cultures. Boys are not schooled and end up with a gang education."

The teacher indicated acceptance of the situation. He was saddened but accepted the situation without taking action.

Another teacher indicated resignation with the fact that patriarchal fathers might be abusive and controlling. The teacher seemed to accept this possibility and suggested ways to work around it rather than taking more appropriate remedial action.

> "Communication with families of girls. If you do not want to make waves, you start with the mother. If a kid alleges abuse by the father, do not send in the social worker. It makes things worse. Father gets enraged about sharing family secrets. Talk with the mother because she is at home and she probably wants to get out from under."

Attitudes held by an institution may be seen by its actions. In this case, the actions of the institution were to defer rather than remediate. Deferential actions are a manifestation of ethnocentrism because in the opinion of the author, by these actions, the institution seems willing to accept conditions for second language students that they would strongly object to for Anglo-Saxon students.

Uncommitted

The second proposition about the school system is that it was uncommitted to second language students and their parents. Evidence supporting this proposition included how proactive the school was in establishing an authentic relationship with parents; the length of English language training provided to students, father, and mother; the status of ESL courses with respect core courses; and the language used for most formal school-parent communication.

School is not Proactive

A teacher mentioned that the school did not proactively include parents in the life of the school on a regular basis. Parents were invited to major meetings and festivals, but not to daily activities in which their children might have a part. A teacher shared that second language students who liked him generally wanted their parents to meet him. No indication was made that the school actively welcomed parents, even though parental expectations strongly supported academic achievement,

> "Parent expectations are still very strong at home. Because kids are at school all day, we get to establish bridges that compensate for cultural differences. But parents find school very scary, official, and institutional even though we have translators, etc. I have found if I have a good relationship with a child, they generally want to have me meet their parents. I've never used an official translator, I usually use a brother or uncle. There are four of 'them' meeting and only one of me. Thus they feel more power as long as who ever is translator gets along. I want to tell them the student is doing well or poorly...problem is over-response. Parents take the hard line and want their kid to work harder. But how to communicate academic achievement appropriately is important. Percent is

often erroneous, use of bubble forms do not provide enough detail. We haven't changed this though."

Another teacher thought that refugee students ought to get support to learn English until they learned it and not restrict ESL for three years, After three years they "graduated" from ESL whether they knew English or not,

"Refugees are welcomed by the Feds and the Feds ought to support this beyond the three year language training."

Indeed, parents who were the wage-earners were eligible for a maximum of 16 weeks English language training. If the parent were at home he/she would not be eligible for any training at all. This policy worked against effective school communication with the home. Most schools did not address this problem. For example, they did not consistently offer Adult ESL for parents.

ESL is Not Core Budgeted

In times of fiscal constraint, budgets are cut. The pattern of cuts indicate budget areas a school district considers to be lesser priority. The areas of greatest priority which seldom experience cutbacks are considered core to the organization. ESL is not one of these. During recent cutbacks, ESL was considered vulnerable to 30% cutbacks in teaching staff. A teacher remarked,

"The system is under budgetary constraint and will elect to eliminate ESL programs."

Formal Communication is in English

Further evidence of low commitment to second language students is simply that most formal communication with parents was in English and not translated into other

languages. Although many documents were translated in several languages, parents did not respond to schools and participate in dialogue. A concerned teacher said,

> "We should try to find out why there is no contact with parents. Teachers are frustrated and communicate this. Parents may be intimidated. Should we use translators more? Is there a better way to make use of them?"

Another teacher expressed concern over the computer controlled phoning system set up to inform parents of their child's unexplained absence from school,

> "The home room teacher meets only for special occasions such as timetables, report cards, etc. The Phone Master System is in English only."

Although a teacher listed the documents that are translated into Vietnamese, Arabic, Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish, he noted,

> "The school newsletter is in English only, but the special events bulletins are translated, to encourage parents to come to concerts. The article on the concert was a full page."

Another teacher explained that communication with parents occurred only if something was critical,

> "I don't often talk to parents. I prefer to keep it between the kids and myself. If I get to the parents it is with a knowledge that it is critical."

School System Needs

If the school system is ethnocentric and uncommitted to second language students, then it may be concluded that it has needs. School systems need to increase their intercultural awareness and their commit intercultural awarene language students and their parents. The following discussion expands on teacher perceptions of these needs.

Intercultural Awareness

Teachers thought the system needed to use more complex patterns of communication with parents, increase the frequency of opportunities to communicate, and reduce alienation experienced by parents. They are discussed in order.

More Complex Patterns of Communication

A teacher explained how communication could be encouraged to occur spontaneously and informally,

> "We are hiring a bilingual teaching assistant. He will be in the hallways at lunch hours to provide a role model for students. He is 24 years old and very mature. When he was a student here, he helped us during the Iraq war. He has a lot of cross cultural experiences. He seems open to other religions and is non-religious himself. He will work 18 hours a week 12:00 - 3:30. He starts tomorrow. Then we will hire a Vietnamese and Chinese one."

Using a bilingual teaching assistant might provide a model for connecting with parents. A bilingual assistant might be hired to provide school-level liaison with families, or the particular teaching assistant might be given an expanded mandate to visit homes too. Thus more spontaneous and informal communication would increase the complexity of communication patterns between the home and school.

A teacher talked about complexity in another way. He referred to cultural neutrality,

> "We scheduled a parent night in conflict with Ramadam, a religious festival. Our staff decided to offer an afternoon, a second time, to allow the Arab parent community to attend. They made a special thing for Arabs rather than say an evening and an afternoon one. It is a subtle difference, but the reaction of staff was 'Why have this special event for the Arabs?' It

would be preferable to emphasize it as an afternoon alternative than to focus on the religious aspect. We must make the statement in culturally neutral terms."

Cultural neutrality requires intercultural awareness, a knowledge of other religions and celebrations.

A teacher reported that her school was staffed part time with translators,

"An Arabic translator is on staff half a day per week. We use him with the ESL group. A Vietnamese and Chinese translator comes in half days as well."

The regular presence of translators on a school's staff serves to heighten intercultural awareness and enables communication between teachers and parents to be more spontaneous and meaningful. Another teacher described the interpreters who were involved at a parent meeting,

"At parent teacher night, we had 4-5 different interpreters. We show and talk about the ESL program. We explain how to get a grade 12 diploma. We've done this for 4-5 years now. More and more parents show up each time. We give a slide tape show of the school too."

Two other examples of creating greater complexity in communication patterns was given by another teacher,

"Report cards are sent home in the first language as much as possible. Some of the cards were built through XXXXXXXXX, some were made here. Not as formal as we would like them to be .... We use multi-cultural liaison workers out of XXXXXXXXX to contact parents at schools."

But teachers were not always successful in understanding limitations of second language students in their classes,

"A Vietnamese girl was acting out a traditional role in the classroom. She withdrew from the course because she could not stretch her vision to meet my expectations. Usually I present my expectations to a student sensitive to their points of view. This way we can use stereotypes positively."

Encourage Opportunities to Communicate

Teachers were able to identify several strategies that the school used to communicate with parents of second language students. One teacher said,

> "What the school is doing is sending information home in different languages. ESL teachers are phoning home etc. Skits and plays bring them into the school."

Once in communication, teachers must be cognizant of reactions parents may have of comments they make. A teacher explained,

> "Get parents involved at an elementary and junior high level with the school. They are scared because of language deficiency. Parents are working in labour and support jobs for long hours. Students are scared of a parent-teacher meeting because they are afraid of what the teacher may tell the parent. Parents will say we are not strict enough. We must explain to teachers the importance of positive reinforcement and feedback when giving it to immigrant parents."

A teacher concluded that we must learn to communicate in a more complex way so that parents of second language students are able to merge their attitudes with Canadian attitudes. For the school to adapt, it must merge its attitudes with attitudes of other cultures. The teacher concluded,

> "We must be willing to make the changes in our system that will enable cultures to merge, like ensuring a bilingual capability in parent meetings, in notifications home, in modifying curriculum, so its not European oriented."

Reduce Alienation

Does intercultural awareness result from reduced alienation or is it the other way around? Perhaps both occur simultaneously. In any event, teachers sought ways to help

parents understand their relationship with the school. A teacher commented,

> "We need a mechanism in place where the parents would come into the school and understand their rights, roles, and our expectations of these roles. Often parents only talk to teachers if first spoken to."

Such a mechanism might help reduce alienation and allow for increased intercultural awareness.

A teacher explained how the school found people to translate parent invitations to an orientation meeting,

> "We invited parents for an evening and an assistant in the library translated the invitations into Spanish, a cafeteria worker worked on the Chinese version and a student worked on an Arabic version."

However, alienation may be increased unwittingly by the school. A teacher observed that the interpreter's dress and academic background may have further alienated a parent, rather than reduced it,

> "Meeting with Lebanese parents, the interpreter wore a suit and tie and had an education. The father was dressed in a used dress shirt, green work pants, and had less education. The Interpreter seemed to put the father down."

Curious teachers might ask questions and learn more about second language students at the school, thus reducing alienation,

> "Certain last names of students will indicate different places where they originate. If teachers know these names, they might be able to understand different ways to respond to them."

Commitment

If the system were uncommitted to second language students as described above, it might become more committed

through the implementation of several strategies. It might integrate second language needs, enable peer modelling, and ensure a stable and predictable school environment for students who use context cues, not English language, to understand what is expected of them.

Integrate Second Language Needs

Teachers became more aware of second language needs when the school made this an expectation. One teacher expressed his opinion,

> "I think that in hiring me, the interview zeroed definitely on how I would treat special needs. I was hired by another principal, who was very sensitive to treatment of individual. They were not looking first for specialists or academics. It was very clear that this was the kind of teacher group here."

Teachers must learn more ways to communicate in class if integration of second language students were to increase. An ESL teacher noted,

> "Teachers constantly comment that they can't understand what a student is saying, and I suggest: ask them to repeat it; say it in a different way; to guess what they are saying; to draw pictures; to act it out."

One's image of teaching radically changes science, English, mathematics, socials, or any other content course when one imagines dancing and jumping up and down in the class to get a point across to five language groups represented in the class of 30 students.

Enable Peer Modelling

A major resource in a school was the student body. When interpretation or translation became a problem, the school turned to bilingual students for help. But these <u>are</u>

students, and like most students, need time to socialize and to learn. Too much reliance upon them by the school system might be unfair. A teacher noted earlier,

> "There is a need to use peer translators. But for these peers it is using up their spare time and they have their own lives. We might hire them on work experience."

Teachers felt comfortable asking students, acting as peer ambassadors, to help,

> "Whenever language is a barrier for me I use the peer ambassadors. They speak more than one language and help with registration. I also rely upon the multi-cultural liaison officers."

A second teacher echoed this comment,

> "There are 16 peer ambassadors in the school. We got funding from the XXXXXXXX Education Trust. The purpose is to help students and families. To help socialize, to adapt, to become more comfortable. To be a buddy or role model. They are mostly grades 11 and 12 students."

Provide a Stable, Continuous and Predictable Context

An often overlooked but important issue is how second language students keep track of changes in their school environment. Since their language skills are often too low to pick up subtleties of coded speech (Like, Day Three is changed on Wednesday to ABCDC instead of ABCCD.) second language students felt uncertain of what was in store for them when they went from class to class on a daily basis. Second language students use contextual information to a great extent to predict what will happen next. A teacher said,

> "When a long weekend comes up, Fridays are usually shortened. We need to establish a policy and systematize the shortening of Friday making Wednesday

> always a full day. Kids come to school on Wednesday with no lunch but will have to stay all day when they are expecting to go home. So they end up being hungry all afternoon at school. We need to be more sensitive about that."

Even if second language students did understand that a change were occurring, the school often failed to ensure that parents received an official notification in their own language. Often such notices were published in a newsletter, but the newsletter was in English only. So second language students were disadvantaged. A teacher noted,

> "If the school has a shortened day, how do ESL parents trust this information, and not a lie from a student. Schools communicate this in writing to English parents, but not to other parents."

Conclusion

The data presented in this report supported several propositions characterizing second language students, their parents, and the school system, namely:

1. Second language students (a) feel displaced from their homeland, (b) are academic achievers, (c) feel alienated from Canadian-born peers and from their own families, and (d) are in denial of the culture of Canada and other cultures.

2. Parents of second language students (a) are distrustful of the Canadian educational system, (b) are resistant of new values their children want to adopt, (c) maintain patriarchal relationships with those around them, and (d) feel powerless and dependent upon their children to help them cope with their English language environment.

3. School systems (a) are ethnocentric, supporting English, Anglo-Saxon culture, and (b) are uncommitted to providing <u>equal</u> service to second language students compared to English-speaking students.

Flowing from these three propositions are three propositions of **need**:

4. Second language students need (a) to feel connected with their homeland, (b) to be challenged in more

than academic areas so they develop into "whole persons," (c) to become self-empowered and be able to make choices openly, and (d) to grow in intercultural awareness.

5. Parents of second language students need (a) to feel connected with the school system and understand its values, (b) to grow in intercultural awareness and empower their children to make informed decisions, (c) to learn collaborative communication skills and to advocate for their children in culturally appropriate ways, and (d) to become self-empowered and less dependent upon their children to cope with their English-speaking environment.

6. School systems need (a) to grow in intercultural awareness and enable more effective communication with parents and students, and (b) to increase its commitment to providing second language students equal service to English-speaking students.

The needs described by teachers are conflicting and require creative responses. Only through creative responses will schools be able to provide equal opportunities for learning and acculturation experiences into Canadian society.

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